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ABSTRACT

Two important topics in early literacy development in Slovakia are discussed in this paper: the conceptual framework for its stimulation by efficient preschool curriculum, and the continuity of formal elementary school education with respect to children's preceding developmental achievements. The paper discusses the ongoing research project focused on the possibilities of early literacy intervention--the project is conducted by the Department of Social and Biological Communication in collaboration with the Department of Preschool and Elementary School Education, University of Bratislava, Slovakia. It notes that teacher education students participate in the project, and that the program aspires to be reflective of the current educational trends and needs and to offer an alternative to the traditional preschool educational program. The paper states that two groups of preschool children (5-6 years) have been investigated, and their phonological awareness, pre-reading, and pre-writing strategies have been analyzed. It presents some preliminary results showing the children's pre-reading and pre-writing skills as they naturally emerged in highly stimulating literacy. (Includes a table and 8 charts.) (NKA)

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by

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The continuity or discontinuity in early literacy development at the beginning of formal school education in Slovakia

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Abstract: Two important topics in Early Literacy Development are discussed. The conceptual framework for its stimulation by efficient pre-school curriculum, and the continuity of formal elementary school education with respect to children's preceding developmental achievements.

Introduction

The paper will inform on the ongoing research project focused on the possibilities of early literacy intervention. The project is conducted by the Department of Social and Biological Communication in collaboration with the Department of Pre-school and Elementary School Education (Faculty of Education, Communes University in Bratislava). The students, i.e. the future pre-school and elementary school teachers participate on the project within their diploma works. The main objectives of the project are: To offer a theoretical and empirical support for the development of Early literacy intervention programme for kindergartens. The programme aspires to be reflective to the current educational trends and needs and to offer an alternative to the traditional pre-school educational programme.

"Literacy" in early education in Slovakia

What does the traditional approach means in Slovakia?
Regarding the literacy development the pre-school educational programme is focused mainly on the development of spoken language - the spoken vocabulary and verbal communication. The main criteria are - to reach excellent articulation, grammar and syntax from the point of view of the official Slovak language.

Regarding the written language - the traditional programme is aimed mainly at the preparation for school reading and writing. The preparation is understood as the development of basic pre-reading and pre-writing i.e. perceptual-visual, phonological and perceptual-motor (grapho-motor) skills as the prerequisites of the formal aspects

of the written language. In other words, this approach to literacy could be labelled as a code-oriented preparation for formal reading instruction by specific teaching method.

Shortcomings of this approach are apparent - it does not offer enough experience in and knowledge about more important aspects of the written language connected with meaning, context, self-expression and a variety of its function. (One illustrative example is that the "Language education" and "Literature" represent the separate - isolated parts of the pre-school curriculum).

The above claims of the official Pre-school curriculum may appear differently under specific circumstances, depending on particular kindergarten and the teachers themselves. In addition, there are several alternative programmes offering different views and paying more attention to literacy and the written language. In general - they lack some unifying (if any) theoretical and/or conceptual framework for early literacy intervention. Some of them are doing very well, but more or less intuitively or without any clearly set objectives and goals.

Theoretical background for early literacy intervention

Among other sources, our approach to early literacy education was also influenced by the conceptual framework outlined by Anne van Kleeck (1998). The author derived her model of "Pre-literacy domains" from the 4-component model of reading process offered by Marion Adams (1990), a very well-known reading theorist. According to this model - reading is cognitively controlled by four hypothetical processors. Two of them are connected with the MEANING aspects of print: *context processor* and *meaning processor*, and two are connected with FORM - i.e. formal aspects of print: *orthographic processor* and *phonological processor*.

According to Anne van Kleeck, the above processors are linked with four different areas of skills, knowledge and cognitive competencies in pre-literacy development (so called "Domains" of particular processors). The model also assumes the natural sequence of stages in literacy development, beginning from understanding the contextual and meaning components of print (initial stage), via the natural and spontaneous discoveries of meaning-to-form correspondences, up to the gradual improvement in understanding the form - i.e. the orthography and phonology of the written language.

Based on the above areas of knowledge, experience and skills, and the developmental sequence in their acquisition, Ann van Kleeck recommends the tasks

and educational activities specific to particular areas of knowledge, experience and skills. In our opinion, the above model may serve as a meaningful and purposive framework for organising educational activities in early literacy intervention.

The research project

In our research, several pilot training studies have been projected, in which the specific training programmes – focused on particular pre-literacy domains are being developed and their usability and effect on children's pre-literacy knowledge and skills are studied.

In agreement with the natural developmental stages described by the model, the initial programmes were related to those "pre-literacy domains" connected with meaning and function of reading - i.e. context and meaning processors, e.g.:

1. Children's Literature Books Programme (meaning-oriented)
2. Project Teaching Programme (function-oriented)
3. Modelling the Rich Literacy Environment Programme (stimulation, interests, reading/writing habits, etc., literacy environment being an integral part of any educational activities).

Consequently, the effect of these Context - Meaning – Function-oriented educational activities on the development of some formal aspects of print and written language has been studied (Table 1).

In this paper we would like to present some preliminary results showing the children's pre-reading and pre-writing skills as they naturally emerged in highly stimulating literacy - educational settings in comparison with similar data obtained from children in traditional pre-school educational programme. Furthermore, we would like to show that even the first graders - several weeks after the school entry - do not perform the same tasks so well. This may be caused by the school itself that children - accepting new school criteria - abandon their previously developed reading/writing strategies. This experience raises an important question of continuity of the formal reading/writing instruction with respect to the child's developmental gains in literacy acquisition.

Methodology

Two groups of pre-school age children (5-6 yrs.) have been investigated and their phonological awareness, the pre-reading and pre-writing strategies have been analysed.

The Literacy Group – was represented by the pre-school age children in highly stimulating educational setting in literacy rich environment. The literacy intervention consisted of the complex activities and literacy events emphasising the meaning and function of printed materials (supporting the knowledge about the world exploiting books, journals and literary texts of different genres and other sources of printed information). The programmes 1,2,3 (mentioned above) were implemented into the curriculum.

The Control Group consisted of children from traditional kindergarten (the programme described earlier).

Evaluation Tasks and Measures (see Table 1)

- The series of Phonological Awareness tasks (see Chart 2)
- Writing tasks - letters knowledge (identification, recognition and production), signature, meaningful texts - messages (letter, shopping list or other list of objects)
- Reading tasks - reading the written text, reading from the book
- Reading behaviour - choice of the book from the school library, manipulation with the book, etc.
- The teacher questionnaire for evaluation of home-literacy environment

Results

Family Background *(Chart 1)*

The children from the Literacy group - in contrast to those from traditional kindergarten (control group) - originated from socially and economically lower-level families. Similarly the parents' education level was higher among children from the control group[1].

[1] This was not surprising, as the traditional kindergarten – control group was located in the centre of Bratislava, while our Literacy group school was located in a suburb of the city.

Phonological Awareness *(Chart 2).*

In spite of the less advantageous family environment of the Literacy group - these children performed better in many aspects of literacy/preliteracy measures. First of all, there were no group differences found in the phonological awareness tasks. These results are also in favour of the Literacy group, since the children in the control group have been explicitly trained in phonological tasks. (Phoneme blending and segmenting tasks, etc. are the regular part of the traditional curriculum, as mentioned before). Nevertheless, the equally good performance of Literacy group children suggests, that these abilities could be developed also implicitly through the natural literate activities in print rich environment.

Letter knowledge *(Chart 3)*

As shown in the Chart 3 the Literacy group performed a little bit better in all tasks requiring the knowledge of letters. In addition, there were several children in this group who produced the letter string in alphabetical order.

Meaningful text writings *(Charts 4 – 5)*

The written products of children have been referred to the categories of writing adapted from Sulzby, Barnard and Hieshima scale (1989, the category of "conventional writing" has been widened).

Chart 4 shows the proportion of different forms of conventional writing strategies used by two groups of children with the higher rate of more advanced strategies among the Literacy group children. Sixty five percent of children from the Literacy group used some form of conventional writing in comparison with 39 % of the control group (Chart 5).

Reading strategies *(Chart 6)*

Reading strategies were also referred to the Forms of Reading Scale (by Sulzby, Barnard and Hieshima,1989) and the proportions of 1 - 7 reading forms are presented in Chart 6. Again, the literacy group perform more frequently on the higher levels of reading.

Some other differences between groups appeared, e.g. in reading performance when using the conventional reading; in the signature the surname was used in 15 % of literacy group and 4.3 % of controls; literate behaviour was very mature in some

children from the literacy group (e.g. using the contents or book register, book choice from the library, etc.).

Comparison with the elementary school children

The focus of another study was on the investigation into the literate competencies of elementary school children. The performance of 1st grade children (at the beginning of school year - 6 weeks after the school entry) in similar reading/writing tasks was compared with the group of pre-schoolers. The comparison showed that the great part (41 %) of children failed in the first writing task, or found the tasks impossible to be accomplished. In the next task 14 % o children refused to write. Anyway, the proportion of conventional strategies was lower in comparison with pre-schoolers in both tasks (Chart 7).

In the letters-writing task (Chart 8), the performance of 1st Graders was again lower. They wrote about 7 letters on average (in comparison to 14 letters written down by pre-schoolers). In addition, some letter-number confusions and repeated letters appeared frequently; the alphabetical order was not used by any child, etc.

The above findings suggest that, under the influence of formal reading/writing instruction - in their effort to avoid failure, children abandon their previously developed literate competencies, being limited to the skills formally trained at school.

Summary

The results of the above studies confirm considerable literacy potential of pre-school age children in general, in both educational settings. The comparison of the two groups of children from different pre-school educational programmes has shown the higher rate of the more advanced reading-writing strategies among children from kindergarten with the Early Literacy Support Programme as the most important part of the curriculum. The meaning- and function-oriented intervention resulted in spontaneous discoveries of meaning-to-print relations as well as in the general improvement of orthographic and phonological skills, as manifested in children's writings.

The literate competencies of pre-school age children could be significantly enhanced by the intervention, provided that a good literacy programme and the rich literacy environment are implemented into the curriculum.

On the other hand, the analysis of similar data obtained from elementary school children resulted in a lower performance of 1st Graders in several writing

tasks. These results suggest that school practices in traditional Slovak schools are apparently not tied up with and/or do not continue the pre-school developmental achievements. On the contrary, they seem to ignore or even suppress the child's literate competencies acquired before.

* * *

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Van Kleeck, A.: Preliteracy domains and stages: Laying the foundation for beginning reading. Journal of Childhood Communication Development, 20 (1), 1998.

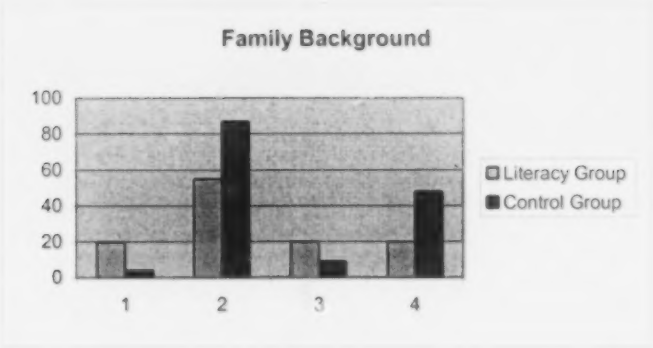
Sulzby, E., Barnart, J., Hieshima, J.: Forms of writing and rereading form writing: A preliminary report. In: J.Mason (Ed.): Reading-writing connection. Boston MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1989, pp. 31-63.

Table 1: **Intervention Programmes - Tasks and Evaluation Measures**

Context Processor	1. **Children's Literature Books – meaning-oriented** 2. **Project Teaching – function-oriented** 3. **Rich Literacy Environment**
Meaning Processor	

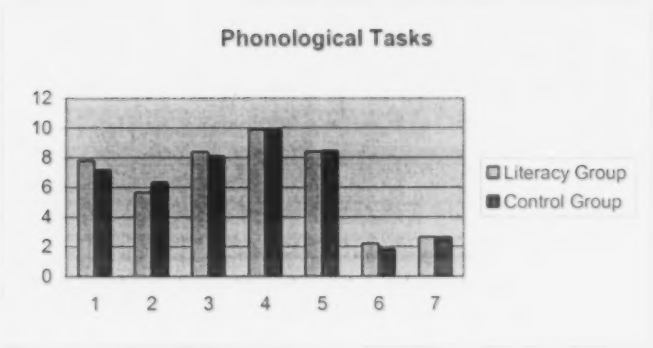
Orthographic Processor	**Phonological Processor**
Tasks and Measures	
Phonological Awareness Tasks (see Chart 2)	
Letter Knowledge	- identification - recognition
Writing Tasks	- writing letters - meaningful texts: - letter/message - shoping list - other lists of objects
Reading Tasks	- rereading the written text - reading from the book
Reading Behaviour	- choice of the book from the bookshelf - manipulation with the book, etc.
Teacher' Questionnaire	Evaluation of the family literacy environment

Chart 1



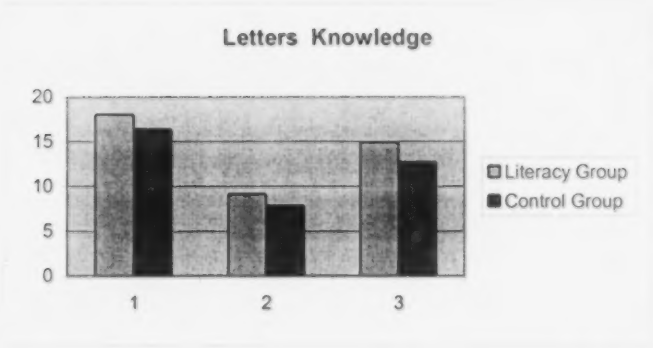
1 Family Climate - problematic
2 Family Climate - Good
3 Educational Level - Lo
4 University Education

Chart 2



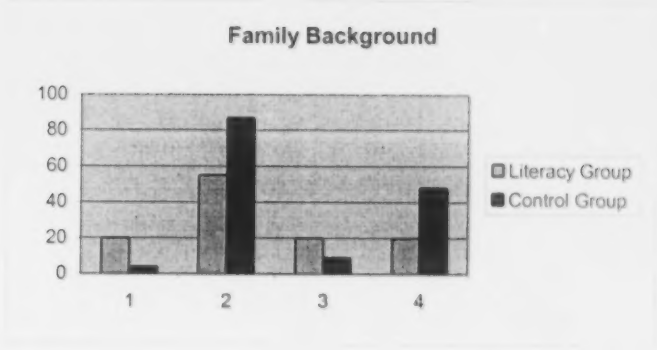
1 Rhymes - detection
2 Rhymes - production
3 Sylables segmenting
4 Sylables blending
5 Initial phonem detecti
6 Phonemes segmenting
7 Phonemes blending

Chart 3



1 Identification
2 Recognition
3 Writting Letters

Chart 1



1 Family Climate - problematic
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3 Educational Level - Lo
4 University Education

Chart 2

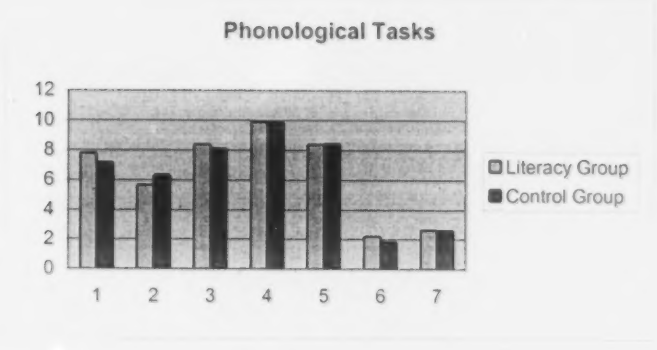

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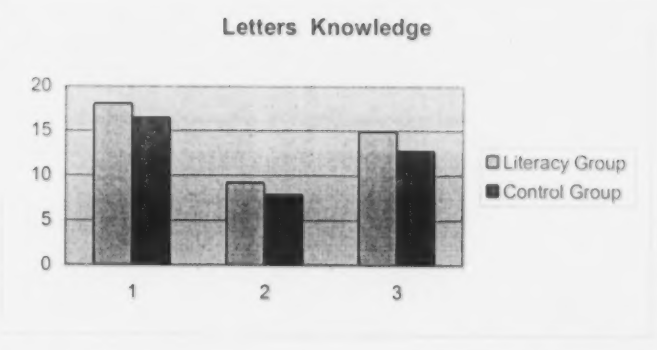
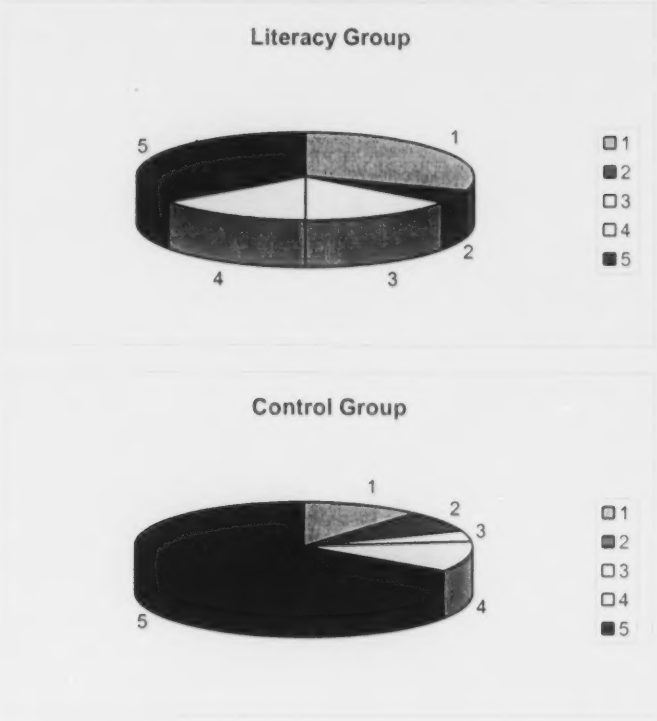
Chart 3



1 Identification
2 Recognition
3 Writting Letters

Chart 4 **Writting Strategies**



1 Invented - Convention
2 Conventional - Words
3 Conventional Sentenc
4 Meaningful Text
5 Other - preconvention

Chart 5

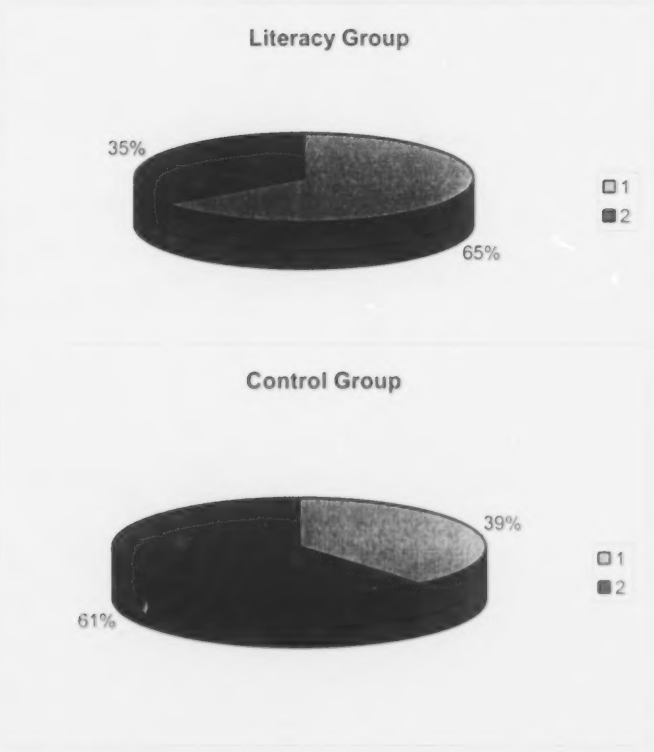
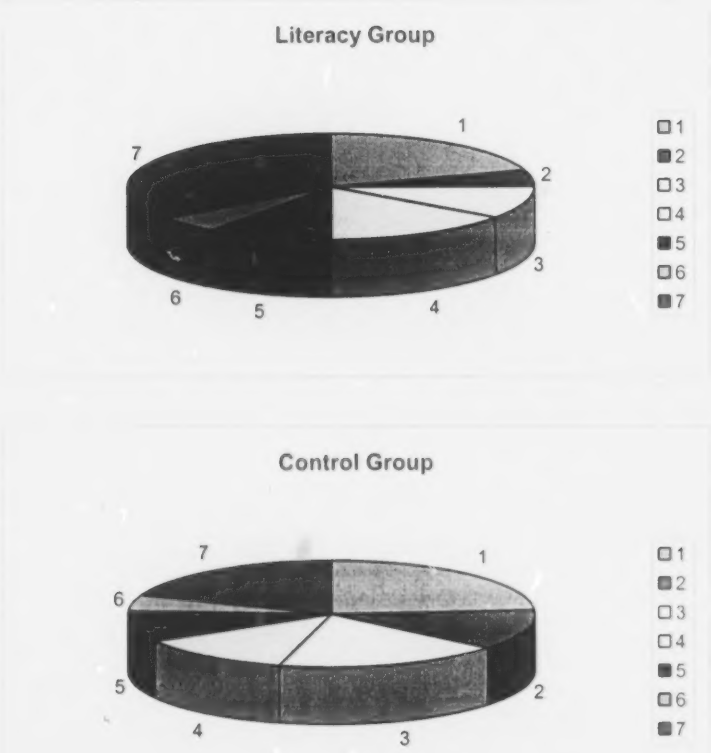

Literacy Group
35%
65%
1
2
Control Group
39%
61%
1
2
1 Conventional Writings
2 Preconventional Writin

Chart 6 **Reading Strategies**



Preconventional

1 Labelling and Describing
2 Dialogue
3 Oral Monologue
4 Written Monologue

Conventional

5 Naming Letters
6 Strategic Reading
7 Conventional Reading

Comparison of 1st Graders and Preschool-age Children

Chart 7

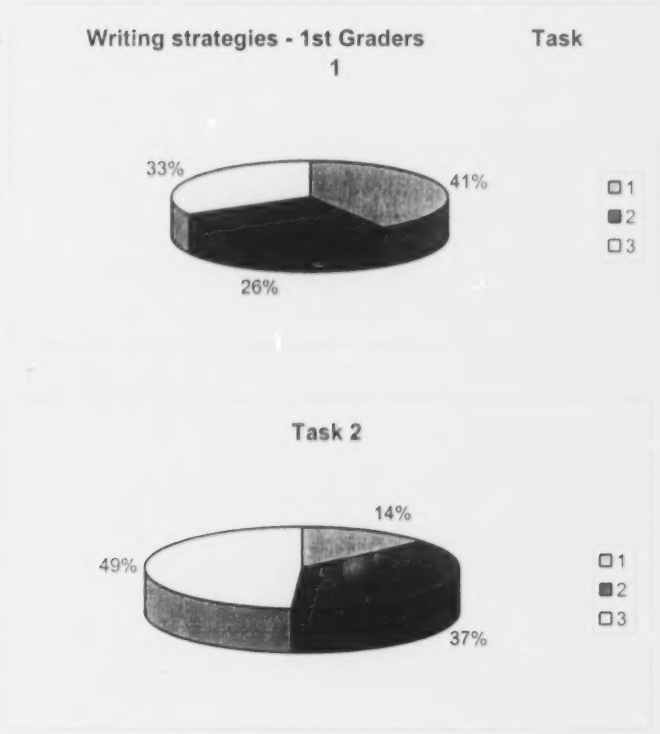
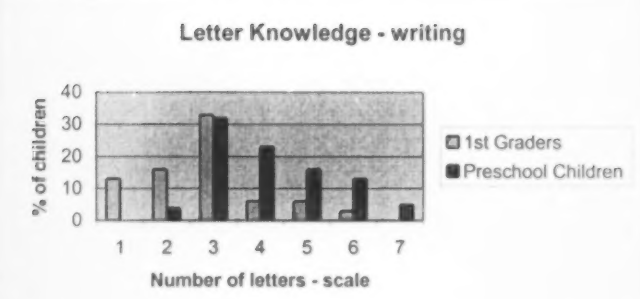


Chart 8



1 No letters
2 1 - 5 letters
3 6 - 10 letters
4 11 - 15 letters
5 16 - 20 letters
6 21 - 25 letters
7 26 < letters